

## FOREWORD

I've heard it said that Robert Howard, author of the Conan books, had once stated that he felt Conan stood behind him, weapon ready strike, from the beginning of each novel to its end. I experience something similar and have for many years.

Most discovery writers (writers who “wing it” for at least the first portion of their story as opposed working from a firmly established outline) are familiar with a certain phenomenon that happens when their characters become solidly developed. It is tremendously exhilarating – because you know you've done it right – and extremely frustrating – because then you really know that you've done it right. The phenomenon? It's when your characters start to act, or speak, independently of the outline or idea you have for a scene.

Example:

Instead of Ba'tvian immediately going into hiding once he reaches the mainland port in the first part of *Descent Into Darkness*, he tears down the hangman's scaffold in the main square. Then, after I'd written it and tried to understand why he'd done that, he says, quite clearly in my head, “They would have hung me there. I would have ended, been made less than the dirt they trod upon. I will not allow it. I am meant for far greater things – as you already know.”

Now this sort of thing had been happening to me off and on for years, with various characters and stories. I kept it to myself – people would think I was nuts, right? Eventually let my closest friends, who were writers, in on my secret. Tricia and LJ both experienced the same thing. Still, it wasn't something that we normally talked about with others.

Then we started attending conventions and meeting other authors. We discovered something: *this phenomenon was completely natural, quite common, and was a sign of discovery writing success.* We were elated.

When this sort of thing happens, it changes your life. The characters jump out of your imagination to give their two bits on their stories, and sometimes even drag you into their realm. Sure, all of this may happen inside your head, triggered by the fictional people that you've created. That doesn't make it any less of an adventure.

These creative escapades can be helpful. It certainly helps me with plotting, outlining, and motivation. I could run through scenarios, gain a deeper understanding on the characters and what makes them tick. They give me answers, point out problems, alternate avenues.

Copyright 2011 by Doris Ross. All Rights Reserved.

[www.TrinityGateways.net](http://www.TrinityGateways.net)

Now in 2011, I find myself with a problem: my characters won't stop talking to me. Even when I'm not writing, when I'm working the day job, listening to an audio book, watching internet shows (I don't watch TV), or playing video games, someone is there in the back of my mind, letting me know that I'm not alone in my head. Sometimes, I can almost see them wherever I happen to be, watching me, talking to me, waiting for me to complete their stories.

It sounds creepier than it is.

Since they won't leave me alone, I figured I might as well use these experiences in another way. The result: *Snapshots of a Writer*. They are presented in no particular order. Enjoy.

– Doris Ross

## 1: BEGINNINGS

I've always had issues with writing at home. Growing up, I lived with four other people – my parents and two brothers – and there were always interruptions. During middle school and early high school, I tended to write at night, after everyone was supposed to have gone to bed because then no one bothered me.

Then I got my first car. Suddenly, day time avenues opened up. I could go anywhere, do anything. The world was my oyster. Yet there was one drawback.

I only had a desktop computer.

It wasn't much: a 4GB hard drive, 256 RAM, a processor that would be considered super slow by today's standards. I'd gotten it for Christmas in 1994 and it did the job. It was, at that time, everything I needed it to be, except mobile.

So I wrote by hand in bookstores and coffee shops – my solution to the interruptions at home. I equipped myself with packs of pens and mechanical pencils, several spiral notebooks, and printouts of notes or typed scenes to be edited. After school, after or before the jobs my father made me get in order to pay my car insurance, I would spend hours working on stories.

When I'd finished them, I found myself confronted with the same old problem. They had to be typed and I could only do that at home.

This pattern continued through high school and into college, until 2002. By this time I'd formed friendships with my fellow website founders, LJ and Tricia. The three of us, along with Tricia's younger sister Meghan, took off to Colorado for a week that summer. We'd wanted to get away from Jacksonville for a bit, see a different and beautiful landscape, maybe find some inspiration.

We got lost exploring the mountains, saw the sights in Denver, went to a Renaissance, Faire, and had a lot of fun. In the evenings, we'd talk about our dreams, writing, the future. Then, when that wondrous week was over, we came home, determined to write, to do more.

Less than a week after our return to Jacksonville, I bought my first laptop.

It felt like I'd gotten my first car all over again. This time, however, I was truly without chains. That laptop went *everywhere* with me. I typed up all my handwritten stories in the notebooks, then started new ones using MS Word. It was while I was transcribing *Failure* that I began to 'meet' them: my characters.

Imagine this:

*I'm seated at a table inside an old mall that's been converted to a community college campus. I'm between classes with over an hour to kill. It's chilly. The place is curiously empty for a campus, but then, most of the classes are on the second floor and I'm seated on the first. Behind me is a coffee vending machine that eats up my dollars to give me hot, watery, instant vanilla coffee. I keep a cup of the stuff next to me. In front of me sits the laptop and a document holder with a notebook splayed open on it. I'm typing away, turning my nearly illegible scrawl into comprehensible text.*

*I feel I'm not alone.*

*I look up to see the main character that I've written about leaning against a nearby wall. He's tall, with a lean frame, angry pewter eyes, and black clothing. He has such an air of near violent coldness that it's easy to believe that he's the reason there's no one else around. This is Deadshot, my resurrected warrior assassin, shape-changer, former shaman-in-training, and tortured soul.*

*He glares at me. Finish it, he seems to say, though he doesn't speak a word. Tell the story – all of it. Give me an ending. You owe it to me.*

*I look at the notebook with its completed story. Failure was written to tell of Deadshot's beginning, not his end. I'd already started another story for him, in fact, one that took place much later in his life. So with my character watching my every move, I saved and close the document I'd been working on and open that second story.*

Deadshot continued to haunt me until I'd written five stories and bundled them all together to make my first "book" entitled *On Black Wings* – the one I call my artificial book. It will never be published.

There are many reasons for that. It was heavy on description, somewhat poorly written, and the plot of the fifth story was not one that I was satisfied when I looked over it in the years that followed. I was still learning as a writer, establishing a different world, building believable characters, and trying my hand at story arcs that lasted more than a handful of pages. I had a lot to learn.

I did go back and re-work the first story in the book, *Failure*, several times. I even posted it for a while on the website as an early work: this is where I came from, see how much better I've gotten? That was mostly to remind myself of how I'd come as a writer.

Sometimes you need those kinds of reminders.

Since *On Black Wings* I have embarked on other projects, finished other books. My characters have increased in number, their stories cramming into my skull, their voices echoing in my ears. Some have been posted on the site, others have been forwarded to my agent. Yet I've never forgotten that artificial book or what took place in it.

Recently, I took *Failure* down from the website. I didn't do it because I no longer needed or wanted the reminder of it. I did it because it's no longer relevant to what I'm working on now.

You see, Deadshot hasn't stopped haunting me. He pops into my life, glares, and lets me know that I'm not yet off the hook. What I finished in 2003 wasn't the real story – it was a learning exercise. He's given me the time to improve, to expand my skills. Now he's demanding that his real story be told.

As I sit here typing this, I can feel him behind me. I heave an exasperated sigh, bring up a document I'd been working on earlier in the day, and turn in my chair to face him. He stares at me with angry expectation. I point to monitor, to the multi-book outline I have displayed there.

“See this?” I say. “This is your series. It will tell your story, the stories of your oath-brothers, the story of your world. I haven't forgotten you – as if you'd let me. Things have changed, though. The setting, the timeline, the back plot, all that heavy crap that I'd bogged down the original story with has been trimmed, streamlined, or cleaned out. There's a new cast, new adventures for you. Some stuff will stay the same, but most of it's vastly different – and I'm not finished.”

I pick up my mug out of reflex, then realize it's empty. I hold it my lap as I meet his eyes.

“You will have your ending.”

He stalks forward to lean over my chair and read. The outline's sketchy in places; I'm still working on it. I get up to let him take my seat as he peruses through my notes. I go to the kitchen for more coffee, take my time with adding the sweetener and cream. I even brew a fresh pot. Then I go back to the office.

Deadshot is gone. One the desk, propped up against the monitor, is one of the notepads I keep around, the cover flipped open. In neat cursive on the page is the message: “It needs more conflict.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I respond, scowling into my coffee mug. “I already knew that.”

## 2: LESSONS LEARNED

I began writing my first serious story in 1992. It was a mystery thriller with supernatural elements and was the birth place for one of my characters, Alex Rosselle. I wrote almost a hundred pages on a Smith Corona word processor – a glorified typewriter with a 3.5 diskette drive and a 13 inch monitor. I had to break up the story into several files because the Smith Corona couldn't open a file more than 20 pages long.

I don't remember a great deal about the story. By the time I got my first real computer two years later, I'd decided it wasn't going anywhere. Alex, going by a different name with a different background, was salvaged, the plot scrapped. It was just as well as the files couldn't be converted from the Smith Corona word processing format to MS Word.

Looking back on it, there are a few details that leap to mind, heavily obscured by the mists of time. One of those details was that I had no clue how to handle the antagonist. He was no more than a vague concept.

I did a little better in the story that followed. That antagonist had a face, a name, a history. What he lacked was a clear motivation. I had no idea why he hated his sister so much.

The third major story I started was another than never went anywhere. Still, I count it as a success. Entitled *Strange Happenings*, it had a complicated back story, a manageable cast that had grown unmanageable by the time I stopped, and possessed two plot threads that I would salvage for use in other books.

What made *Strange Happenings* a success was what I learned from it. I learned that I could write a story with novel-length potential, and was dedicated enough to being a writer to keep at it. I learned that the answer to not knowing what to do next, plot-wise, *was not* to bring in more cast members.

By the time I hit page 201, I realized that the project was doomed. I'd lost the plot thread a hundred pages back, there were too many characters running amuck, things were happening that made no sense. When I went back to look at my plot, I saw that I really had 2 plots that were trying to cancel each other out. Each one had its own associative cast, so I took each thread and the characters it possessed and placed them in notes until I could figure out what to do with them.

That separation left the story a tattered mess. The collection of scenes that remained was nothing that I could deem salvageable. So I archived the whole thing, dug into the books of my favorite authors, and tried to piece together how they crafted their plots.

I toyed with those two plot threads off and on. I took tons of notes, built a new world for one of them, tried twice more to make the other one work. Again, I learned from the failures. Plot thread A couldn't launch because the story I wanted to tell had way too much setup and back story weighing it down. Plot thread B couldn't launch because of the setting – I kept choosing cities I wasn't overly familiar with – and the lack of solid development in the characters.

So I took everything back to the drawing board.

Plot thread B got its first real start by accident. I had an urge to read a paranormal romance that didn't feature a vampire as part of the main couple. At the time – it was early 2004 – I looked at the bookstore shelves and didn't see anything that appealed or hadn't read before. Finally, I decided to write what I wanted to read until the urge went away.

That's when Alex Rosselle decided to take center-stage. She popped up one day, said, "This is my story and I like Jacksonville, FL" and proceeded to drag the story – and that old Plot thread B – into the city I lived in. It worked.

A year later, I had a completed first draft of a novel.

I combed over that novel for several years, editing, tweaking, revising. Meanwhile, I wrote a sequel, one that was more urban fantasy than a true paranormal romance. Then I combed through that.

When I finally got an agent, he prompted me to do a more thorough revision on the first book. There were various reasons for me to do this and repetitive words were at the top of the list. So I began the editing/revision process once again. I'd give pieces to Lisa and Tricia for their feedback, implement changes, have them look it all over again. Even the characters – with Alex being the most vocal – gave their two cents worth on the work.

*I'm sitting in Starbucks, the novel open on the laptop in front of me. Lisa – who had accompanied me on this writing session – is seated at the table next to me, concentrating on her own work. We both have lattes next to us, headphones on our heads, music in our ears, each of us absorbed in our little worlds.*

*I'm at a scene where Alex's former partner/former boyfriend makes an appearance at the café her friends run. I'm not happy with it yet can't pinpoint what's wrong. As I go through the opening of the scene for the millionth time, I become aware of someone leaning over my shoulder to look at the monitor.*

*"I can't stand him," Alex says. "He's a lying, thieving bastard."*

*"Yes, I know but he's necessary," is my reply.*

*"Well, yeah, I get that. It's just that he doesn't come across right here. I mean, he's kind of popping up out of nowhere, all pretentious smiles and arrogance. Yeah, he's a pain –*

Copyright 2011 by Doris Ross. All Rights Reserved.

*that's pretty evident – but there's no weight, no substance. There's nothing there to indicate that he isn't an impulsive filler, something stuck in to entertain people while they wait for my current partner to arrive. And readers are supposed to buy that his appearance here is significant in some way?" She shakes her head at me, picks up my latte, downs the last of it.*

*"Hey!"*

*"Hey, yourself. You need to fix that. Right now, it feels like Strange Happenings all over again and it's worse because this jackass is supposed to be there." She gives me back my now empty cup. "Bad writer, no coffee."*

*She leaves me to think over what she's said while I glower over my punishment.*

*She was right. That's exactly how the scene feels. I lean back in my chair to stare at the ceiling. How do I fix this?*

*His sudden inclusion in the book was the key. I needed to foreshadow it, lend it that weight. How do I do that? Rumor, gossip. This is relatively small paranormal community hidden within the larger mundane community that is the city of Jacksonville. It would be feasible to give that paranormal community some of the small-town characteristics of, say, Felda, FL.*

*So go back a ways in the book and begin to write. After a while, Alex comes back to peer over my shoulder again. She doesn't say anything as I continue to type. She smiles approvingly, and places a fresh cup next to the laptop. I see it, pausing in mid-stroke. She laughs as I mumble"*

*"Good writer, more coffee."*